

CHARM OF THE DESERT!

All around him the desert unrolled in the morning light, vast, silent, mysterious: vast, with the vastness of the sky; silent, with the silence of the grave; mysterious, with a mystery no man has ever fathomed. He stretched out his arms and breathed great draughts of the fresh, cool air. It filled his body with a new life and vigor, like strong wine. He was not appalled by the vastness, nor the silence, nor the mystery. He reveled in it, lived in it, and was glad to be alive in it—and yet he did not know how glad he was.

But the sun had arisen, and the morning coolness was giving way to the awful heat of the day, and he must make the mountains by night at any cost, for there and at no place between was there water to be had. So he turned back to his camp by the spring, whose waters trickled from between two huge boulders.

As he prepared his simple meal of bacon and coffee, he talked to his two traveling companions, one a solemn-eyed burro, the other a still more solemn-eyed black cat. The former he had purchased for the small sum of \$15, the latter he had found wandering about the desert, half-starved, and it had followed him about on his wanderings ever since.

These three were great friends, more friendly than man can ever become to his beast in civilization; for the three traveled together day after day without seeing another living thing except the wild animals of the desert and mountain. They knew hardship and suffering together, and each bore it in his own way: the burro always silent, plodding, imperturbable; the cat with many a protest; and the man with cool self-reliance and judgement.

The little mouse-colored burro and the big black cat knew more of the thoughts and life and dreams of this stalwart, sunburnt master of theirs than ever did a wife know of her husband or a girl of her sweetheart. Day in and day out they listened to his talk of his past life, of his present, and what he hoped of the future. Always they listened in silence, like Indian braves around a council fire, making no comments, yet always with attention.

The cat's name was "Satan" the burro's "Patience," and the man's Robert Page, and the big, eight-inch Colt's revolver at his side he called "Prudence."

Robert Page had come from the East two years before, broken in health, and with little money. He had regained his health, and was now looking for his fortune. Two years of prospecting in the deserts of California had straightened out his six feet of manhood, until now one could hardly realize him to be the same frail piece of humanity who had arrived there two years before.

Breakfast over, he fed the scraps to Satan, and packing his outfit on the back of Patience, he filled his two canteens at the spring and the journey began.

On they plodded; the man with his eyes ever alert for mineral signs; the burro, solemn and imperturbable; the cat with the swinging trot of its kind. But Satan was not made of the same tough fiber as the other two, and soon he began to lag behind. At this, Page paused and helped the big cat to a seat on his own shoulders, where Satan sat in perfect ease, occasionally tapping Page's ear with a playful paw. But after awhile Page began to weary of the burden on his shoulder, and Satan was transferred to the back of Patience, who acknowledged the added weight by a shake of the head that made her long ears crack like a pistol shot.

Thus they traveled all day, suffering from the great heat exhaustion, and thirst, for the water gave out at 4 o'clock; but always the lure of gold kept up their courage.

It was dark when they reached the spring at the foot of Sager's Peak. Page threw himself on the ground and drank with long, gurgling draughts. Patience buried her muzzle to the eyes in the cool liquid and seemed to breathe in the water, while Satan sought the far end of the spring and lapped up the water in a more gentlemanly manner, keeping a distrustful eye on his two companions the while. He had never conquered his hereditary dislike of being near water, no matter how thirsty he was.

After they had all drunk their fill, camp was made, supper was cooked, and in no time Page was rolled in his blankets sleeping the sleep of exhaustion under the frowning wall of the mountain.

After midnight he was awakened by Satan, who was standing on his face, with claws inserted into his two weeks' growth of whiskers, his back arched, and spitting his fear and hatred at something in the darkness just beyond the little circle of light which still shone from the embers of the camp fire. Page's awakening thought was that Indians were trying to scalp him.

"Here, here, you devil!" he muttered, when he found out that it was Satan. "Let's go my face, will you? Ouch, you're pulling all my whiskers out, you bloomin' fool! What ails you anyway?"

As soon as he could get the cat disentangled from his beard, Page reached for his pistol, at the same time noting everything around him. Patience standing trembling by the little fire, and Satan by his side still spitting his fury at the darkness. All this told him that it was an animal he must deal with, probably a coyote.

He turned on his side and searched the darkness with his eyes. Two eyes from the black void met his own, two yellow balls of fire. There was no light to shoot by, but he did not hesitate. Raising Prudence, he fired without attempting to aim, and as the report echoed along the mountainside, there came an awful scream mingling with the echoes, that made Page have queer feelings in the region of his stomach, and that made his hair feel starchy. No coyote could have made that noise. Then a long, dark body shot into the air, high above him, a streak of white showing on its breast, and again Prudence roared out, and a streak of flame split the darkness. This time Page fired at the splotch of white, and the animal clawed the air in convulsion movements, stuck against an overhanging ledge, hung for an instant in the void, then came tumbling down at Page's feet, bringing with it a shower of earth and stones.

Satan, who had been watching all this paralyzed with fear, leaped to one side as the dark form came down almost on top of him, and with a frightened "meow!" sprang lightly to the equally-terrified Patience's back, where he clawed hair out of the little burro by the pawful.

Page threw some wood on the fire and examined the animal, keeping a wary eye on it the while. It was a huge mountain lion, and stone dead, with a bullet hole between its eyes and one in the white spot on its breast. He dragged the body to one side, quieted the cat and burro, and throwing some more wood on the fire, rolled himself in his blankets again.

The next morning he arose, as usual, with the sun. He ate his breakfast and started into the mountains alone, with the intention of prospecting some leads he had seen there before and returning to camp in the evening. He swung his pick over his shoulder and started to ascend the mountain. On the first ledge above his camp he stopped and stared, speechless with amazement, at something on the ground.

It was the place where the mountain lion had struck the night before, and it had broken off the end of the ledge, revealing a vein of glittering yellow gold. With a cry of joy Page bent over to examine it. He picked up some loose particles and crumbled them between his fingers. Then, rising to his feet, he drove his pick deep into the ledge, sending the bright yellow particles flying in every direction. He bent excitedly over it again, his hands trembling nervously and his breath coming fast. As far as the pick had entered the gold still showed and the vein grew perceptibly larger.

"It's the beginning of a good one," he cried exultantly to the mountains above him. Then he bent over the side of the ledge and scanned its base.

"If it holds out," he said aloud, "I ought to find it again down at the bottom," and dragging his pick after him, he slid down and dug frantically at the base of the ledge, where it joined the mountain side. Soon he uncovered the vein again, still wider than at the top. He threw his pick, and his exultant cry echoed along the mountain side. At last the fortune was found, he told himself over and over again. Now he could go back to his old home and live like a white man. But even with the thought, his eyes unconsciously wandered to the great, yellow waste below him and lingered there almost lovingly.

All day he worked at his claim, staking it out, and getting specimens of the ore. And always as he worked his thoughts were of his old home

and the girl who was waiting there for him. Yet often his eyes would wander to the beautiful scenery around him and he would breathe a sigh of regret.

Three months after this, Robert Page stood on the platform of the little depot at Bismark, bidding farewell to his old friends and partner, Jim Boadie. Jim was little and dried up, and had a complexion like the desert. Jim was now sole owner of Satan and Patience, as a present from Page, who was going back to his old home.

Page had \$20,000 to his credit in a San Francisco bank, and more coming from the "Mountain Lion" Mine he located.

"I don't envy you much," Jim was saying. "You'll go back there and get old and fat and—married. You'll look back on this life here and wish you could come back for a breath of the desert and mountains, and your wife won't let you. You'll want to prospect again, just for the pure love of the game, and your wife won't let you. You'll want some sow bosom for breakfast, and your wife will call you a heathen. But good luck to you, though I do hate to see you throw your life away like this."

"But I'll come back some time," Page protested, as his eyes roved hungrily over desert and mountain.

"No, you won't, not if you get married," said Jim, with a smile. "Your wife won't let you."

It was six weeks after this that one day Jim Boadie, who happened to be again in Bismark after supplies saw Robert Page alight from the west-bound passenger train, suitcase in hand and a broad smile on his face. Jim looked as though he saw a ghost when Page walked up to him with outstretched hand.

"But—but where's the wife?" Jim blurted out, looking over Page's shoulder as though trying to see another ghost.

"Where's Satan?" asked Page in return.

"Over there," said Jim, pointing a shaking finger at the cat, who was sitting on the depot platform regarding the station agent deftly rolling big trunks aboard the baggage car.

"Come here, you devil you!" called Page, and Satan, recognizing him, suitcase, store clothes and all, ran forward and sprang lightly to Page's shoulder, where he sat and affectionately tapped the ear nearest him with a soft paw, purring loudly the while.

"But your wife, where is she?" demanded Jim, still in some trepidation. "Wife," repeated Page, with a sheepish grin. "Why, I wouldn't give Satan here for the best wife in the world. I'm not a marrying man, Jim."

"And you've come back to stay?" gasped Jim, seizing the other's hand.

"Sure," affirmed Page. "Did you think I could stay away from this country long? Oh, I love it all!" he cried passionately, as he scanned the scene before him.

"Did you turn her down?" asked Jim, still in some doubt as to the lady. Page shook his head. "I'll tell you how it was," he said. "I went back there, and everything was changed for me. I lived there twenty-four years, then came here and lived for two, and the two years here knocked all the civilization out of me."

"The girl wasn't the same either. We were both disappointed, I guess. She thought, somehow, I'd be the same, and I thought she'd be the same, but the two years had changed us both a lot. We didn't know each other when we met. I think when I left there she pitied me, and wasn't really in love. I was in love with her then, but not with her as she is now."

"There was another fellow, too, who was trying to monopolize her some, and one night at a big affair they were having, he and I tangled. It wasn't my fault, though, for I was only too willing that he should have her, but I wasn't feeling good that night. I had to wear a dress suit that almost cut me in two every time I bowed, and strangled me every time I turned my head. I used to wear these things when I was a younger and more foolish, but it's a lost art with me now, and the quicker I get into a khaki suit again the better I'll like it."

"I don't remember how our little affair started, but he got to making insinuating remarks about me and mine, and of course I told him a few things myself. Then he asked me if I'd brought my mule with me—he'd seen some snapshots I sent the girl of me and the burro. I told him it was only natural, the interest he showed, as mules liked to know about each other, but that he would find mine on its native soil, where he ought to be; that mine had sense enough to keep its place."

"He slapped me in the face then,

right there before every one. I forgot what was expected of me in a bunch like that—couldn't remember anything only that I was some mad myself. I reached for old Prudence, and Jim, I never felt so homesick in my life as I did when I didn't find the old gun at my side. I thought I must be dreaming at first, but he still stood there, looking like he was about to swell up and bust, and every one laughing at me. Right then I got hostile."

"But land sakes!" broke in Jim, excitedly. "Didn't you hit him?"

"Sure I hit him," said Page confidently, "and I hit him some hard, too. He got up and made for me, and I hit him again. Then the whole bunch of white-fronted gents jumped me at once. They said, after it was all over they just wanted to part us and keep peace in the house, but they went at it rather rough, and I couldn't see anything but red, so we all tangled, and I had the fight of my life. They told me next day, it was the most disgraceful thing that ever happened in that town but I thought right then that life might be endured if they had that kind of a time often; and if the girl still wanted me, I was surely bound to take her. It was a queer sight when it was over. There was paper callars and neckties all over the floor. Me and my hundred-dollar dress suit looked like a caricature of Happy Hooligan. It was a beautiful row, though, and when I invoiced after the deal I found I'd had a good time and a pair of black eyes. But the other guy didn't wake up for two hours."

"The next day the girl told me a few things and said I ought to know the way back to the place where I learned such rude ways. I told her I thought I knew a way to get there pretty quick; so we parted, and I came straight here."

"And say, Jim," Page finished, as he disentangled Satan's paws from his hair, "I guess she was right, too. Did you ever see such a scenery as that? Did you ever breathe such

pure air as this? Oh, I tell you this country is good enough for me, and a prospector's life is good enough for me, too. Me for California and the West all the time!"

"Sure," agreed Jim, with a grin.

"Suppose," said Page, "we go to San Francisco tomorrow for one good time, then hit the trail again. I have plenty of money to stake us both for the rest of our days, I guess, and we'll prospect for the fun of it."

Their hands met in a grip that made both take a short breath. They turned down the one street of Bismark, Jim telling what had happened since Page left, Page listening eagerly to every word, while Satan walked solemnly behind.—Harry Chester Bedwell.

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